

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PANAMA 04115

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MPOL, PN
SUBJECT: OUTLOOK FOR U.S.-PANAMANIAN MILITARY COOPERATION

REF: PANAMA 03894

SUMMARY: WHILE WE EXPECT RELATIONS BETWEEN THE U.S. AND PANAMANIAN MILITARY FORCES TO BE REASONABLY GOOD OVER THE NEXT DECADE, THE PROSPECT IS DIM THAT PANAMA WILL SPONTANEOUSLY DEVELOP ANY MEANINGFUL MILITARY CAPABILITY. THIS IS PARTLY BECAUSE MOST PANAMANIAN--INCLUDING MUCH OF THE GUARD--SEE LITTLE NEED FOR MILITARY STRENGTH. THEY SEE NO THREAT TO THE CANAL OR TO THEIR OWN NATIONAL SECURITY, AND IF ONE SHOULD ARISE, THEY EXPECT UNCLE SAM TO TAKE CARE OF IT. MEANWHILE, PANAMA HAS BETTER WAYS TO SPEND ITS SPARSE RESOURCES--WAYS WHICH ARE LESS LIKELY TO HAVE UNPREDICTABLE AND UNDESIRABLE EFFECTS ON THE POLITICAL HEGEMONY OF THE GENERAL STAFF. OVER TIME THIS ATTITUDE COULD CHANGE, BUT EVEN SO PANAMA IS UNLIKELY TO DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE TACTICAL MILITARY FORCE. NOT ONLY ARE ITS RESOURCES SMALL, BUT THERE ARE POLITICAL REASONS FOR NOT DEVELOPING A MILITARY/TECHNICAL CAPACITY AND MENTALITY IN THE GUARD. TO DO SO MIGHT UNDERMINE THE POWER OF THOSE
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WHO NOW RUN THINGS. THE U.S. SHOULD KEEP THE DOOR OPEN TO COOPERATION AND CAREFULLY ESCHEW PUBLICLY FAILING TO TAKE THE GUARD SERIOUSLY, BUT WE SHOULD EXPECT PANAMA TO TAKE LITTLE IF ANY OF THE TACTICAL MILITARY LOAD FROM OUR SHOULDERS FOR THE NEXT DECADE OR MORE. END SUMMARY.
1. THE PANAMA CANAL TREATY GIVES THE UNITED STATES "PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY" FOR DEFENSE OF THE CANAL THROUGH 1999.

BUT IT ALSO ESTABLISHES A COMBINED BOARD OF SENIOR PANAMANIAN AND U.S. MILITARY REPRESENTATIVES "TO FACILITATE THE PARTICIPATION AND COOPERATION OF THE ARMED FORCES OF BOTH PARTIES IN THE PROTECTION AND DEFENSE OF THE CANAL." THE BOARD IS CHARGED WITH SUCH THINGS AS PLANS FOR COOPERATIVE DEFENSE EFFORTS AND PLANNING AND CONDUCT OF COMBINED MILITARY EXERCISES. THE U.S. SOUTHERN COMMAND HAS ALREADY BEGUN PRELIMINARY PLANNING ON HOW SUCH COOPERATION MIGHT TAKE PLACE. BUT IT DOES NOT NECESSARILY FOLLOW THAT THE U.S. WILL, OVER THE NEXT TEN YEARS, SEE THE NEED TO DEVOTE THE RESOURCES TO CANAL DEFENSE THAT IT HAS DEVOTED TO DATE. AND EQUALLY IT NEED NOT FOLLOW THAT THE PANAMANIAN NATIONAL GUARD WILL BE ABLE AND EAGER TO PARTICIPATE IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY IN CANAL DEFENSE, EXCEPT AS A POLICE FORCE.

2. THE FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTION BEHIND THE TREATY NEGOTIATIONS WAS THAT A REASONABLE TREATY WOULD IMPROVE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE U.S. AND PANAMA. WE SEE NO CREDIBLE CHALLENGE TO THAT ASSUMPTION. TO DATE, THE MAIN THREAT TO THE CANAL HAS BEEN FROM PANAMANIAN--BOTH THE GOVERNMENT AND INDIVIDUALS. IF THE TREATY IS EVEN A MODERATE SUCCESS, THIS THREAT WILL BE GREATLY DIMINISHED. WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE GETTING ALONG WELL WITH OUR PANAMANIAN PARTNERS IN THE BUREAUCRATIC LABYRINTHS ESTABLISHED IN THE TREATY, IT WILL BE IN PANAMA'S CLEAR INTEREST TO HAVE THE CANAL OPERATING WELL. NOT ONLY WOULD THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT BE HIGHLY

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UNLIKELY TO DAMAGE OR THREATEN THE CANAL; ITS ADEQUATE POLICE FORCE, OPERATING IN NATIVE TERRITORY WITH A GOOD INTELLIGENCE SYSTEM WOULD BE IN A BETTER POSITION THAN WE COULD HOPE TO BE TO DEFEND THE CANAL AGAINST SABOTAGE. THUS IT WOULD MAKE SENSE IF US FORCES IN PANAMA BECAME MUCH SMALLER OVER THE NEXT DECADE, PROVIDED NO UNFORESEEN THREAT EMERGES, WE EXPECT THAT THE CANAL WILL BE FAIRLY LOW IN THE UNITED STATES' GLOBAL MILITARY PRIORITIES IN THE DECADE AHEAD, BEGINNING QUITE SOON.

3. THE PREDOMINANT VIEW OF BOTH PANAMA'S CIVILIAN LEADERS AND THE NATIONAL GUARD IS THAT THE CANAL ACTUALLY NEEDS LITTLE IF ANY CONVENTIONAL MILITARY DEFENSE. THEY SEE NO NEIGHBOR WHO WOULD DO ANY DAMAGE TO IT, OR TO PANAMA AS A NATION. CUBA WORRIES A FEW PANAMANIAN, BUT EVEN ANTI-CASTROITES NOTE THAT CUBA PROFITS FROM THE OPERATION OF THE CANAL. IN ANY EVENT, TORRIJOS AND MOST OTHERS IN THE GOVERNMENT LOOK UPON CUBA AS BASICALLY FRIENDLY TOWARD PANAMA. MOST IMPORTANTLY, EVEN IF THIS SHOULD CEASE TO BE THE CASE, PANAMANIAN, SEE THEMSELVES AS, WILLY-NILLY, UNDER THE U.S. MILITARY UMBRELLA. THEY ASK THEMSELVES: WHAT CAN OUR SMALL DROP ADD TO THE ENORMOUS BUCKET WHICH IS THE U.S. MILITARY MIGHT READY TO DEFEND THE CANAL IF

NEEDED? OTHERS, EVEN SOME WITHIN THE GUARD, ASK WHY PANAMA, BROKE AS IT IS AND WITH SO MANY ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL NEEDS, SHOULD SPEND ITS ENERGIES AND RESOURCES ON THE MILITARY.

4. THIS ATTITUDE IS ILLUSTRATED BY NATIONAL GUARD REACTION TO FMS CREDITS IN RECENT YEARS. NOT ONLY HAS IT FALLEN BEHIND ON PAYMENTS, BUT IT HAS NOT USED ALL OF THE SMALL AMOUNTS OF CREDIT WE HAVE MADE AVAILABLE. THE GUARD SURFACED SOME GRANDIOSE PLANS FOR MILITARY FORCE DEVELOPMENT IN DISCUSSION OF LEVELS OF FMS CREDIT DURING THE

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TREATY NEGOTIATIONS. A GUARD SPOKESMAN REITERATED SUCH IDEAS AT A RECENT BUSINESS EXECUTIVE'S CONFERENCE HERE (REFTEL). BUT IT NOW APPEARS VERY UNLIKELY THAT THE GUARD WILL ACTUALLY DRAW DOWN MUCH OF THE \$50-MILLION WHICH WAS FINALLY AGREED TO. ALMOST CERTAINLY THEY WILL BE UNABLE TO IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THESE CREDIT'S AVAILABILITY

5. WE EXPECT THAT THERE WILL BE SOMEWHAT OF A THAW IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO MILITARY FORCES OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS, BUT SEVERAL FACTORS MILITATE AGAINST AN EX-

TREMELY CLOSE RELATIONSHIP. IN THE FIRST PLACE, TORRIJOS IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO BE AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF THE THIRD WORLD; A CLOSE ALLIANCE WITH THE U.S. WOULD TARNISH HIS CREDENTIALS. FURTHERMORE, HE NOURISHES SOME OLD GRUDGES AGAINST THE U.S. MILITARY--HE APPARENTLY CONTINUES TO

BELIEVE THAT U.S. MILITARY INTELLIGENCE WAS MIXED UP IN THE ABORTED COUP OF 1969, WHICH ALMOST LED TO HIS DOWNFALL. AND WE ARE, AFTER ALL, STILL THE COLOSSUS OF THE NORTH--NOT TO BE HELD IN TOO TIGHT AN EMBRACE.

6. MOST IMPORTANT, HOWEVER, IS THE NATURE OF THE GUARD
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ITSELF. IT IS AN ADEQUATE POLICE FORCE, BUT ITS TRUE MILITARY FUNCTION HAS ALWAYS BEEN SMALL. SOME OFFICERS AND MEN ASPIRE TO MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM; PHYSICAL FITNESS AND OTHER REQUISITES OF A GOOD SOLDIER ARE GIVEN A HIGH PLACE IN GUARD TRAINING. BUT THERE IS GOOD REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THE HIERARCHY OF THE GUARD, AND ESPECIALLY TORRIJOS, WANTS THE APPEARANCE, RATHER THAN THE REALITY, OF A MILITARILY COMPETENT FIGHTING FORCE. THE REASON IS SIMPLE: FIGHTING FORCES MUST HAVE A COMMANDER, AND THAT COMMANDER (OR THOSE COMMANDERS) COULD BE A THREAT TO THE POLITICAL HEGEMONY OF THE GENERAL STAFF. AS THINGS STAND NOW, TORRIJOS HAS A MORE OR LESS DIRECT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMANDER OF EACH OF THE COMPANIES OR DETACHMENTS OF TACTICAL TROOPS, AND WITH THE MILITARY ZONE COMMANDERS. HE KEEPS THE CAUDILLO'S FINGER ON THE TROOPS' PULSE. UNIFICATION UNDER TACTICAL BATTALION OR BRIGADE ORGANIZATION WOULD ATTENUATE THIS. ALSO, PROFESSIONALIZATION COULD HAVE UNPREDICTABLE AND UNDESIRE EFFECTS ON THE PERQS OF THE TOP GUARD BRASS. THE BEST-INFORMED OBSERVERS OF THE GUARD SAY THAT CORRUPTION IS GENERAL, THOUGH PROBABLY NOT UNIVERSAL, AMONG TOP GUARD OFFICERS. THE IMPACT OF A MODERN MILITARY-TECHNICAL MENTALITY IN THE RISING OFFICER CORPS COULD BE DEVASTATING TO THOSE WHO ARE NOW AT THE TOP AND UPPER MIDDLE LEVELS--AND WHO MOST DEFINITELY DO NOT PARTAKE OF THAT MENTALITY.

7. WE BELIEVE MOST HIGH GUARD OFFICERS IN MOMENTS OF CANDOR SEE THE NATIONAL GUARD AS WE DESCRIBE IT, BUT THE IMAGE WHICH IT WANTS OTHERS TO HAVE OF IT IS THAT OF A SMALL BUT COMPETENT AND MATURING MILITARY FORCE. ONE MAY NOT IN PRACTICE TAKE THE GUARD SERIOUSLY AS A MILITARY FORCE FOR A LONG TIME TO COME; BUT TO ACT OR, WORSE, TALK AS IF ONE WERE NOT TAKING IT SERIOUSLY WOULD LEAD DIRECTLY
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AND RAPIDLY TO A SERIOUS DETERIORATION IN RELATIONS WITH IT.

8. IF THIS IS AN ACCURATE PICTURE OF THE NATIONAL GUARD NOW, AND IF (AS WE THINK) IT IS LIKELY TO CHANGE VERY

SLOWLY IN THE YEARS AHEAD, THERE IS LITTLE THAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM PANAMA IN THE WAY OF A REAL MILITARY CAPABILITY IN THE NEAR TERM. WE MAY OVERESTIMATE THE BLEAKNESS OF THE PICTURE; BRIGHT, WELL-EDUCATED YOUNG OFFICERS OCCASIONALLY ENTER THE GUARD, AND THEY MAY EVENTUALLY FORM THE KERNEL OF A NEW, MILITARY-ORIENTED OFFICER CORPS. BUT WE SEE VIRTUALLY NO EVIDENCE THAT THIS IS HAPPENING AT THIS TIME, OR THAT IT IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN SPONTANEOUSLY AT ANY TIME IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

9. THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THIS PICTURE WOULD SEEM TO BE SOMETHING LIKE THIS: WE SHOULD ALWAYS KEEP AN OPEN DOOR TO COOPERATION WITH THE GUARD, ENCOURAGING IT WITHOUT SEEMING TO BE PUSHY AND CAREFULLY AVOIDING CONFRONTING IT DIRECTLY WITH ITS OWN INSTITUTIONAL IMMATURITY. IF THE GUARD SHOULD PROVE AMENABLE, WE SHOULD SEEK TO HELP IT ORGANIZE MILITARILY IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT MIGHT BE AT LEAST A TRIP-WIRE IN THE EVENT OF A WELL-ORGANIZED AND WELL-ARMED ATTACK ON THE CANAL. WE CAN AND SHOULD EXPECT IT TO ADEQUATELY SUPPORT CANAL DEFENSE THROUGH EFFECTIVE CONDUCT OF ITS INTERNAL SECURITY AND PUBLIC ORDER MISSIONS. AND WE SHOULD SEEK--WHILE KNOWING THAT WE MAY OFTEN NOT FIND--ITS COOPERATION IN TACTICAL MILITARY TRAINING AND EXERCISES. BUT WE SHOULD NOT EXPECT MUCH MORE OF IT, AT LEAST IN THE NEXT DECADE. PERHAPS AS THE DATE OF THE FINAL U.S. PULLOUT APPROACHES, PANAMA WILL BE A BIT MORE SERIOUS ABOUT MILITARY NEEDS. BUT THAT IS STILL A LONG WAY OFF. IF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SEES ANY NATIONAL INTEREST IN A NATIONAL GUARD HERE WHICH IS PARTICULARLY COMPETENT IN A TACTICAL MILITARY SENSE ANY SOONER, IT IS GOING TO HAVE TO DEVELOP CAREFUL AND DELICATE WAYS OF GETTING PANAMA AND ITS NATIONAL GUARD TO DO THAT WHICH THEY ARE MANIFESTLY NOT AT THIS POINT READY TO

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